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ABSTRACT

The 1983 British general election saw greater use than ever before in that country of sophisticated marketing research and techniques in the promotion of a party (the Conservatives) and a personality (Margaret Thatcher). With the help of an outside advertising agency, the Conservative Central Office had more marketing expertise than ever before, and the world of politics was distilled to a few points, which were researched by the party's own marketing experts and repeatedly woven into advertisements, party election broadcasts and speeches by spokespersons, the most visible of whom was Margaret Thatcher. The concentration of effort paid off, for the party each day presented an easy-to-understand (because of research and phraseology), unified message that projected an image of a prime minister at the head of a cooperative team of ministers. For the first time in a British election, special arrangements for a plane and bus were provided by a political party for photographers and writers to follow a candidate. Photogenic sites were scouted for prime ministerial appearances. The press room at the central office had alternative sets of background curtains for different moods. Nothing was left to chance by the party, resulting in a landslide Conservative victory. (HOD)

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ADVERTISING DIVISION
Special Topics

THE MARKETING OF MARGARET

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ABSTRACT

The 1983 British general election saw greater use than ever before in that country of sophisticated marketing research and techniques in the promotion of a party (the Conservatives) and a personality (Margaret Thatcher). The result was a landslide Tory victory. Because of the power of television and the presence and personality of Margaret Thatcher, more attention was focused on a political leader in the news media that ever before in British political history.

THE MARKETING OF MARGARET

When the Right Honourable Margaret Hilda Roberts Thatcher in the June 9, 1983, British general election regained her House of Commons seat in her constituency of Finchley, and her party, the Conservatives, were reelected to power with an overwhelming majority of seats, new landmarks in British political history were set.

"No government this century has achieved an increase in its majority on anything like this scale," wrote The Times on June 11, two days after the election.

The party's increase in seats and in votes was the largest won by any party since 1935, and Britain's first woman prime minister became only the second Conservative prime minister ever to be reelected after serving a full term.[1]

Central to any British election is the idea that issues and policies take precedence over personalities, but, in Margaret Thatcher, the Conservatives, as well as the country had a powerful force with which to reckon. In 1979, when a woman was chosen as Prime Minister for the first time in British history, as an ex-Labour minister put it, "She was the only man among 'em."[2]

This image of strong leadership was suddenly thrust upon her, but it was not without substance; she had already proven herself a "resolute" leader in opposition. However, she was more willing than her predecessor, Edward Heath, to adapt herself and her party's policies to being "packaged and sold" as her critics called it.[3]

It was not until 1981, midway in her first term as Prime Minister, that the encompassing word "marketing" replaced "selling" to describe election activities of the Conservative Central Office.

This came about at a time when polls showed Margaret Thatcher to be the least popular prime minister ever in the history of polling.[4]

At the Conservative Central Office the position of Director of Marketing was created in late 1981 and was filled by Chris Lawson, a former director of Mars Snackmaster, Inc., whose definition of marketing is "everything about a product from conception to consumption." His philosophy of communications includes, "You say things frequently and people eventually understand and say it themselves."[5]

BACKGROUND

To place a study of British political marketing and communications within its proper context for an American audience, a brief explanation of the oddly efficient British electoral system should be offered.

The 650-member House of Commons is the governing body of Great Britain. Elected for five years, each member represents a constituency, but he or she does not have to live in the district he or she represents. The 42.5 million voters decide which party is to govern for five years, and the leader of the winning party becomes prime minister. Each party goal then is to get the most members elected to the House of Commons with a large enough majority to guarantee a position of strength.

The Prime Minister can ask the Crown to call a general election at any time, so many Parliaments do not sit the full five years. Under this system, there is an element of suspense as to when the election will be, most often allowing the opposition little time for efficient planning and implementing a political campaign.

Like any other candidate in a general election, the Prime Minister has only to win a seat in the constituency which he or

she represents and, unlike the United States, is not a national candidate.

Because of this, party leaders do not appear and are not named in any of their own national party election advertising, although negative ideas can be put forth about leaders of the opposing parties. If any party leader were to be promoted in paid advertising, the cost of the ad would come from his or her local constituency funds which are limited by law to 2,700 pounds (approximately $4,000 in 1983), plus 2.3p (3.4 cents) per voter, the average total being around 4,000 pounds ($6,000)per constituency. There is no limit as to what can be spent by the parties for national political advertising.[6]

However, opportunities in Britain for political promotion are limited by law as well as by custom. The most striking trans-Atlantic contrast is that British law prevents political parties from buying commercials on radio or television.

However, free party election broadcasts (PEBs) are allocated to the parties by the broadcasters as to time of day, length and to number (in 1983, five 10-minute PEBs were allotted to the Labour and Conservative Parties, and four to the SDP/Liberal Alliance), but the parties and their advertising agencies control the content.

Unlike newspapers,which in Britain are partisan, newscasts, documentaries, etc., on television and radio are rigidly controlled by the broadcasters for balance and fairness as to length of time on air and content.

Since British law requires that each party be allotted radio and television time according to a precise formula each time Mrs. Thatcher appeared, other party leaders were given time also on a length-of-time and frequency ratio of five Conservative to five Labour to four Alliance, the same formula used in allotting PEBs.

The expertly planned media events staged by the Conservatives for Prime Minister Thatcher provided interesting television footage, thereby increasing her coverage. Because of that the television news coverage of other leaders had to be expanded also. During the three-week election period there were 16 programs featuring leaders, or almost one a day, compared to seven in previous elections.[7] The result was interesting and frequently entertaining segments showing Mrs. Thatcher among the people, in factories, on farms and speaking to cheering crowds, and unorganized segments of the same length of Labour Leader Michael Foot ambling along with his Chaplinesque gait talking to empty sidewalks, and rather bland statements being made by talking heads from the SDP/Liberal Alliance.[8]

THE PRODUCT

According to Chris Lawson, the basic difference between marketing a product and marketing a personality or policy is that the marketer "has more to say about what goes into the product. Otherwise it's the same."[9]

Therefore it is important to discuss the basic part of the Conservative "product," Margaret Thatcher, and the cultural and social influences in her life.

Born in Grantham, a small market town in Lincolnshire, Margaret grew up in a flat over the grocery store her father owned. There was no garden, no bath nor running hot water, and an outside toilet. The family unit was the focal point of their existence.[10]

It was in this close family atmosphere that the young Margaret and her sister were instilled with a strong feeling of duty and respect towards their parents, their elders, their neighbors and the church.

"We were Methodists and Methodist means method. We were taught

what was right and wrong in very considerable detail," Mrs. Thatcher explains. "We had a strict upbringing....my grandmother was forever saying, 'If a thing's worth doing, it's worth doing well.'"[11]

Her father was a lay preacher in the Methodist Church, an ardent Rotarian and, at one time, mayor of Grantham. He believed in hard work and its consequences as he strove to move his family into middle class society. He didn't tolerate the words, "I can't," recalls his daughter, and he constantly drummed into the young Margaret, "You do not follow th crowd because you're afraid of being different - you decide what to do yourself and if necessary you lead the crowd, but you never just follow."[12]

This advice has been adhered to by Margaret throughout her life. Few young ladies in the 1940s even aspired to attend Oxford, where she went on a small scholarship and funds provided by her hard-pressed parents.

She received her degree in chemistry and later earned her legal degree. It was at Oxford that she was introduced to politics when she joined the Oxford University Conservative Association, serving for a year as its president.

She sought a seat in the House of Commons in 1948, but was not given a nomination. Then in 1950 and 1951 she was a candidate in the Dartford constituency, losing both times.

In 1951 she married Denis Thatcher, a wealthy industrialist, and two years later, produced twins, a boy and a girl, "with her usual efficiency," as one friend put it.[13] When the babies were four months old she sat for and passed her bar finals, and became a barrister.

The political bug bit her again in 1957 and she won a House

of Commons seat representing Finchley, thus beginning her slow climb up the Conservative ladder to Tory Leader in 1975 after a bitter struggle with Edward Heath.

When she became Prime Minister in 1979, "it scarcely crossed my mind that I was the first female Prime Minister in the West. I have always thought of myself as a politician who happens to be a woman."[14]

During her first four years as Prime Minister, her "resolute" style of leadership earned epithets, "The Iron Lady" (by the Soviets), "Leaderene," "Atilla the Hen," "and "TINA," acronym for There Is No Alternative."

This image of toughness noted by the news media is borne out by a number of incidences. In October 1980, after 18 months in office, Mrs. Thatcher told the Conservative Party conference at Brighton, referring to her determination to see her rigorous policies through, "You turn if you want to. The lady's not for turning." She confirmed to friend and foe, at home and abroad that she would not break for cover when the going got tough."[15]

Later she was to explain the firing of two Ministers, "I'm not a butcher, but I've learnt to carve the joint."

Generally, her relationship with her male Ministers is that of a Nanny with her charges, and those who disagree with her, she calls "wets."

In May and June 1983, Market Opinion Research International (MORI) surveys showed that throughout the election period the electorate judged her to be the best person to be Prime Minister.[16]

Mrs. Thatcher's image was widely seen to be "a capable leader," "good in a crisis," and"someone who understands world problems."

On the negative side she was seen as someone "out of touch

with ordinary people," and someone who tends to "talk down to people."[17]

An ITV news presenter said, "She has the image of being this aloof woman, but she's not. She's an absolute grass roots populist politician... She's the only candidate who understands how to run a campaign geared to media requirements.

"Her gut reaction is rather like Reagan's, that it is the ordinary people who matter. The government must get off the backs of ordinary people and get back to old fashioned virtues. She knew that was how she wanted to conduct herself, but she didn't know what to do. Then she took the advice of the communications experts like David Reece and things began to go her way. Her voice and manner of speaking warmed up, and she became more statesmanlike."[18]

Consensus of the press is that the Conservatives won because of Mrs. Thatcher's understanding of the changing British class system and the perception of the electorate that the Tories offered the best hope to get out of their problems.[19]

Her "special relationship" with President Reagan, fueled by his support of her policies in the Falklands War,added to her image as a world leader.

When she attended, along with Reagan and other world leaders, the conference in Williamsburg during the election period, her plane was loaded with photographers. A Labour member said with some bitterness, "If she'd said the same things in Finchley, nobody would have noticed."[20]

THE PROMOTION

On April 22, 1979, a political reporter for the Observer documented early image-making efforts in an article entitled, "The Selling of Maggie."

Three days after the general election of 1983, the popular BBC1 television program, Panorama, aired "The Marketing of Margaret."

The change in terminology from "selling" to "marketing" was not by accident; there was a change in election tactics between the two elections.

Marketing Director Chris Lawson points out that the advertising agency, Saatchi and Saatchi, had a great deal of control during the 1979 election because "there was not much marketing then... and they could be very creative because they weren't restricted as to what it was they should be saying."

In 1983, the agency was not given the freedom it had before, therefore, it could not be as creative. "If you are restricted to certain subjects you can't be as creative as if you had the whole world of politics to talk about."[21]

For the 1983 election there was more marketing expertise in the Conservative Central Office than ever before and "the whole world of politics" was distilled down to a few points, points that were researched by the party's own marketing experts and repeatedly woven into advertisements, party election broadcasts and into speeches by spokesmen, the most visible of whom was Margaret Thatcher.

Using their own computer, described as the most sophisticated in Europe, "the party was able each day to run their own research and feed the information to the Prime Minister and her Ministers the sort of things they should be talking about in speeches that would be covered by the news media. On any given day during the election period, thanks to "Operation Fast Feedback," all Tory spokesmen concentrated on the same subject.

The concentration of efford paid off, for the Tories each day presented an easy-to-understand (because of research of words and phraseology), unified message which projected an image of a Prime

Minister at the head of a cooperative team of Ministers.[22]

Nothing was left to chance by the Tories; even Pravda, the Soviet newspaper, on the day after the election announced that the Conservative landslide followed an "unprecedented manipulation of public opinion."[23]

Panorama reporter Michael Cockerell pointed out on the air that the Prime Minister's personality and style of leadership was more on public display than any other leader's during any previous general election. "Behind the scenes... Mrs. Thatcher and her closest media advisers have exhibited a mastery of the most sophisticated modern methods of image-projection and political persuasion that the other parties cannot match."[24]

For the first time in a British election, special arrangements for a plane and coach were provided by a political party for photographers and writers to follow a candidate. At 1,000 pounds ($1,500) per person, paid by the media, the "reptiles" (so nicknamed by the Prime Minister's husband, Denis) were not only guaranteed to be at the right spot at the right time, but also were given frequent access to the Prime Minister. In contrast to earlier times, during the 1983 election, Mrs. Thatcher would walk over to the press corps and ask, "Now, boys, what did you want to ask me?"[25]

Photogenic sites were scouted for Prime Ministerial appearances. They were particularly appealing to the Tory leader and her advisors if they involved the wearing of an industrial hat or the use of equipment in a factory.[26]

In 1979 Mrs. Thatcher afforded photographers an opportunity to photograph her holding a calf (for 18 minutes to allow plenty of time) and wielding a broom, the obvious caption for which was to "sweep Labour out."

However, in 1983, there was one factory where her instinct

stopped her from holding the product, rope. One of the election issues was a return to capitol punishment, hanging being the British method of execution. Picture editors could have had a field day with that caption.[27]

Chris Lawson pointed out on the Panorama program of June 12, that while Labour was selling gloom and doom, the Conservatives spent more than five million pounds ($7.5 million), a phenomenal amount by British standards, largely showing Mrs. Thatcher enjoying politics.

By 1983 the staged media event had reached its most sophisticated level ever. Mrs. Thatcher's scientific background allowed her to talk knowledgeably with employees of high tech industries, timed so that the cameras could be in place. Admissions to rallies were by ticket only. Conservatives used security as the reason for the handpicked audience; Labour critics said she was afraid to face hecklers.[28]

Carol Thatcher who was her mother's "wardrobe mistress" during the campaign would disavow the fear of hecklers accusation for she packed older clothes because of missiles of eggs and tomatoes.[29] At least one political writer said that Mrs. Thatcher was at her best with hecklers.[29]

At Central Office a brand new press room had a unique feature, alternative sets of background curtains for different moods. Light blue was for relaxed moods, dark blue for the resolute approach. On the day the manifesto was launched startled reporters heard martial music piped into the room.[30] Her image as a strong and resolute leader was well established after four years in office. A prime marketing strategy of 1983 was to build the strength of those around her.

Whenever Mrs. Thatcher addresses an audience she gazes directly into their eyes, because for the first time in Britain a politician uses a Teleprompter, a device that President Reagan introduced in that country in 1982 during a speech at Westminster Hall. The Labour dubbed it "Thatcher's sincerity machine."

Another first for Britain was a special campaign song, the lyrics for which were written by a leading British playwright and the music written by the composer of "Hello Dolly." The lyrics are:

> Who do we want, who do we need?
> It is a leader who is bound to succeed:
> Maggie Thatcher - just Maggie for me.
> These British Isles have found a fighter
> With the coolest of styles,
> No other politician comes within miles,
> Two, three, four, Thatcher, Thatcher, Thatcher,
> Not a man around to match her.
> One more time. No, one more, two more,
> Three more terms for Maggie.
> T-H-A-T-C-H-E-R spells Maggie.[31]

There is more truth than poetry in the song, for the Conservatives with all their rather considerable resources are mobilizing for a return to power the next time around, and the "Britannia lady" is looking to set another first for herself.

NOTES

[1] Havilland, Julian. "Conservative lead was never challenged." The Times Guide to the House of Commons June 1983. Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk, St Edmundsbury Press, 1983, p. 23.

[2] Sampson, Anthony. The Changing Anatomy of Britain. London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1982, p.41.

[3] Butler, David and Richard Rose. The British General Election of 1979, London, MacMillian Company, p. 140.

[4] Worcester, Robert. MORI. British Public Opinion, General Election 1983, p. iii.

[5] Lawson, Chris. Personal interview. October 17, 1983.

[6] Circus, Philip, barrister, legal advisor to Institute of Practitioners of Advertising. Personal interview. August 22, 1983.

[7] Kellner, Peter. "The last television election?" New Statesman, August 26, 1983, p. 7.

[8] Jones, Michael, political correspondent, The Sunday Times. Personal interview. September 15, 1983.

[9] Lawson, Chris. Personal interview. October 17, 1983.

[10] Auer, J. Jeffery. "The Image of the Right Honourable Margaret Thatcher," The Practice of Rhetorical Criticism, ed. by James R. Andrews, New York, MacMillian Publishing Company, Inc., 1983, p. 206.

[11] Murray, Patricia. Margaret Thatcher, A Profile, London, W.H. Allen, A Howard and Wyndham Company, 1980. p. 13.

[12] Ibid. p. 24.

[13] Auer. p. 222.

[14] Murray. p. 198.

[15] Bevins, Anthony. "One lady who was not for turning." The Times Guide to the House of Commons June 1983, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk, St Edmundsbury Press. p. 28.

[16] Worcester. p. 102.

[17] Ibid. p 108

[18] Brunson, Michael. ITV news presenter. Personal interview. September 26, 1983.

[19] Personal interviews with Michael Jones, political correspondent, The Sunday Times; David McKie, political editor, The Guardian; Julian Havilland, political editor of The Times; Simon Hoggart, political columnist for The Observer, Punch and author. September and October, 1983.

[20] Parish, Jim, deputy press director of the Labour Party. Personal interview. September 14, 1983.

[21] Lawson, Chris. Personal interview. October 17, 1983.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Cockerell, Michael. BBC Panorama, June 12, 1983.

[24] Cockerell, Michael. "The Marketing of Margaret," The Listener. June 16, 1983. p. 7.

[25] Brunson, Michael, Personal interview. September 26, 1983.

[26] Cleaver, Martin, photographer for Press Association. Personal interview. September 9, 1983.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Parish, Jim. Personal interview. September 14, 1983.

[29] Thatcher, Carol. Diary of an Election, London, Sidgwick and Jackson, p. 19.

[30] Cockerell, Michael. BBC Panorama. June 12, 1983.

[31] Ibid.